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AUTHOR Schwartz, Wendy
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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews reports about the educational experience and expectations of recent immigrants to the United States to dispel some myths about the impact of immigrants on American society and to provide information to consider in attempts to increase the educational attainment of immigrants. In general, immigrant youth and parents have higher educational aspirations than do natives of the same racial or ethnic groups. About 5% of all students in 1990 were immigrants, and they were enrolled in school at about the same rates as the native born population. Immigrant youths are more likely to live in low-income homes and have parents with lower education, but they are as likely as natives to graduate from high school within 4 years of their sophomore year. Immigrant youths are more likely to plan to go to college, follow an academic track, and are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education. Adult immigrants are most likely to come to urban areas, and they earn about 8% of the nation's total income, an amount that equals the immigrant share of the total population. Annually, immigrants pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits such as education and public assistance. Immigrants cannot enter the United States legally without proving that they are self-sufficient and unlikely to need public assistance. (SLD)

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IMMIGRANTS AND THEIR EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT: SOME FACTS AND FINDINGS

This digest reviews several reports about the educational experience and expectations of recent immigrants to the United States, and about the overall role of immigrants in the country. Its purpose is to dispel some myths about the impact of immigrants on American society and to provide information that can be considered in efforts to increase immigrants' educational attainment.

Immigrant Students

In general, immigrant youth and parents have higher educational aspirations than do natives of the same racial/ethnic group. Individual and family factors associated with high school graduation, college-going, and college continuity are generally the same for immigrants and natives, as well as across racial/ethnic groups. Immigrant students most likely to attend college have parents with higher income and education levels, and higher educational expectations for their children. Low family income has a disproportionally negative effect on college continuity for immigrants.

Demographics

According to the 1990 Census:

- There were more than 2.3 million immigrant youth in U.S. schools and colleges—about 5% of all students.
- The percentage of immigrant children enrolling in U.S. primary and middle schools was nearly equal to that of the native born—71% to 74%, respectively, before age eight; and 94% to 96%, respectively, after age eight. Immigrant and native-born youth attended high school at the rates of 87% and 93% respectively.
- Immigrant youth were twice as likely as natives to live in families with an income in the lowest quartile and to have parents with less than 12 years of schooling. Asian and white immigrants, like their native-born ethnic counterparts, were least likely to live in such families. Black youth—both immigrant and native-born—were significantly more likely than Asians and whites to live in low-income families.

High School Experience

- Immigrant high school students are as likely as natives to graduate from high school within four years of their sophomore year.
- Immigrant youth, especially Hispanics, who enter the U.S. after the age of 15 are less likely to enter the school system or to remain until high school graduation than are immigrants who arrive when younger.
- Immigrants are more likely than native-born youth to make choices, beginning early in school, consistent with eventual college-going, regardless of race or ethnicity. They follow an academic track, take advanced courses in mathematics and science, take the SAT or ACT, and work hard to achieve their expectations.
- Variations among immigrant ethnic groups generally parallel variations among native-born groups: Asian immigrants perform better on indicators of college preparation, followed by white and black immigrants.

Postsecondary Experience

- Overall, immigrants are more likely than natives to enroll in postsecondary education, attend college, and stay continuously through four years of college. Asian immigrants are more likely to go continuously to college than any other racial/ethnic immigrant group.

Information Sources

The source of the general information about immigrants presented here is a compilation of "Fact Sheets" published by the National Immigration Forum (1994). The sheets themselves cite data from a variety of sources, such as the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, and analyses by a range of immigration research organizations.

The information on the education of immigrants is drawn from a RAND analysis of data (Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996) from "High School and Beyond" (HSB), a national sample of more than 21,000 tenth and twelfth graders who were first interviewed in 1980 and then followed over a six-year period to determine their educational progress. The RAND report also cites U.S. Census of Population and Housing data and several smaller studies of the educational performance of immigrants and other minorities. It should be noted that the applicability of findings based on HSB data, which comprise information about students who attended high school more than 15 years ago, to the current educational experiences of immigrants is limited for several reasons: the number of immigrants in the nation's schools has doubled since 1980, immigrant students come from increasingly diverse cultural and language backgrounds, and the ability of schools and colleges "to absorb them has arguably deteriorated" (p. xiii). However, newer data on the education of immigrants of equal validity and scope is not yet available for analysis.

National Immigration Forum. (1994). *A guide to immigration facts and figures*. Washington, DC: Author.

Vernez, G., & Abrahamse, A. (1996). *How immigrants fare in U.S. education*. Santa Monica: RAND.

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- The shorter the time an immigrant youth has been in the U.S., the lower are his/her college-going and continuing rates.
- Urban immigrants are more likely to enroll in college than those in rural schools.
- Immigrant college-going is positively affected by a mother working outside the home, and negatively affected by the presence of three or more siblings.

Adult Immigrants

Demographics

- Slightly more than 1.1 million immigrants arrive in the U.S. annually. Almost half of them are female.
  - About 700,000 individuals enter as lawful permanent residents.
  - 100,000-150,000 enter legally as refugees or asylees—individuals seeking asylum because they fear persecution in their homeland because of their political views, national origin, membership in a social group, religion, or race. Refugees apply for protection before coming to the U.S.; asylees apply after arriving.
  - 300,000 enter without legal status (called undocumented immigrants).
- In 1993, the 10 countries (in descending order) from which the U.S. received the most legal immigrants were: Mexico, Mainland China, the Philippines, Vietnam, the former Soviet Union, the Dominican Republic, India, Poland, El Salvador, and the United Kingdom. The 10 countries from which the U.S. received the most refugees were: the former Soviet Union, Vietnam, Haiti, Laos, Somalia, Iraq, Cuba, Iran, Ethiopia, and Liberia.
- Undocumented immigrants constitute about 1% of the total U.S. population and 13% of the foreign-born population. Most enter the country legally with temporary visas and become illegal when they stay. In 1993 there were about 3.8 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S.
- Increasingly, immigrants are people of color. In 1992 the breakdown was: 44% from Latin America and the Caribbean, 37% from Asia, and 15% from Europe.
- In the 1980s, three-quarters of all immigrants settled in six states: California, New York, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, and Illinois.
- The vast majority of immigrants settle in urban areas. In 1990, 93% lived in cities.

English Language Learning

- Approximately 25% of immigrants come from countries where English is the dominant or official language. Another 20% come from Spanish-speaking countries. Nearly 50% coming from other non-English dominant countries already speak English well upon arriving.
- There is a trend towards monolingual English speaking among the children of immigrants. Previously it took three generations for a family to lose its native tongue.
- English as a Second Language classes serve 1.8 immigrants annually, but the demand for them far outstrips their availability.

Income and Payment of Taxes

- In 1989, immigrants earned a total of $285 billion, or 8% of all income earned in the nation. This amount equals the immigrant share of the total U.S. population.
- Immigration does not reduce overall job availability or depress wages. More specifically, it has little negative impact for African American workers in the aggregate, although immigrants may reduce opportunities of low-skilled workers in certain geographical areas.
- Annually, immigrants pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits such as education and public assistance: $70.3 billion as compared with $42.9 billion.
- Undocumented immigrants pay taxes of $7 billion annually because their paychecks are subject to income tax and Social Security deductions. They are not eligible for benefits from most public programs, however.
- Legal immigrants' Social Security payments help keep the Social Security system solvent, since they tend to be young and have years of work ahead of them. However, the percentage of native-born elderly, who collect Social Security rather than contribute to it, is increasing.

Use of Public Services

- The Federal, state, and local costs of educating immigrant youth is about $11.5 billion. For comparison, during the 1992-93 school year, the cost of educating all children was $226 billion.
- Immigrants cannot enter the U.S. legally without proving that they are self-sufficient and unlikely to need public assistance.
- Refugees, who comprise 10% of the immigrant population and who frequently arrive with nothing, are the most likely to require benefits: 15% receive welfare.
- Undocumented immigrants are eligible for only emergency medical care under Medicaid, and nutrition benefits. Despite eligibility for free hospital care, many pay for it themselves or have private health insurance, and thus use services less than the general population.
- About 11% of elderly immigrants (800,000 individuals) receive Supplemental Security Income, an assistance program for disabled and elderly people. More than three-quarters of them have no other source of income because they are ineligible for Social Security.
- In the 1980s, 2% of working-age immigrants, compared with 3.7% of native-born Americans of the same age, received welfare.

— Wendy Schwartz

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, (800) 601-4868. Erwin Flaxman, Director. Wendy Schwartz, Managing Editor.

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